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THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE.¹

THE "Modern Reader's Bible" is completed with the publication of the volume on St. John. We have taken occasion before to call the attention of our readers to this admirable series of books from the sacred Scriptures presented in modern literary form. And now that the whole is complete, embracing both Old and New Testaments, with Ecclesiasticus and Tobit from the Apocrypha, we congratulate the editor, Dr. Moulton, and the publishers on the success of their undertaking. The significance of their literary venture is not yet fully appreciated by the American public, but we feel safe in saying that it is destined to work a great change in the popular conception of the Bible. As men come to have a growing appreciation of the Scriptures as literature they will incline more readily to believe in their divine inspiration. So far from breaking down the authority of the Bible, and lessening men's regard for it, we venture to predict that Dr. Moulton's work will have just the opposite effect. All men reverence genius. The reverence that the whole world pays to Shakspeare, Dante, and Homer has in it an unconscious recognition of the divine. We cannot account for such inspiration as theirs unless we believe that in some way these men were chosen and endowed of God. This is not saying that there is not a very great difference between the inspiration of Shakspeare and of St. Paul. The point for which we are contending is that the possession of great natural gifts, so far from disqualifying one to become the medium of a divine revelation, is in itself a reason for thinking that God would choose such to be the special messenger of his will. How much easier is it to be-

¹THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE. A series of works from the sacred Scriptures presented in modern literary form. Edited with Introductions and Notes by Richard G. Moulton, M.A., Ph.D., Professor of Literature in English in the University of Chicago. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1898. Twenty-one volumes, sold separately at 50 cents per volume, or in a set uniformly bound in buckram in a box. Price, \$10.

lieve that one who has already been endowed with poetic genius should have given him the added gift of spiritual insight into the deep things of God!

If we can awaken the same admiration and enthusiasm for a poet like Isaiah that the world now feels for Shakspeare or Milton, much will be gained. It is but a step from admiration to reverence, and men will be much more ready to accept him as a guide and interpreter of the spiritual life than they are now upon the authority of a Church council or upon the absurd and mechanical theory of verbal inspiration. Dr. Moulton has, then, rendered the cause of religion a most valuable and needed service in thus bringing men back to a knowledge and appreciation of the Bible as literature. After all the average man cares no more for theories of inspiration than he cares for theories of the atonement. It is enough if the Bible interprets his spiritual needs and gives expression to his religious aspirations. The most casual observer of our time must be struck with the appalling ignorance that many even intelligent people show of the simplest facts connected with the sacred Scriptures. If we look for the reasons of such ignorance about a book which lies on everybody's table, and whose name is on everybody's lips, they are not hard to find. First there is in our time a great reaction from the old view of the Bible which held that not only was one book as much inspired as another, but that every word in it was the direct and infallible utterance of the Holy Spirit.

Men who read a book not because it was true, or because they wanted to get at its lessons, but because they thought it was safe to read it and unsafe not to read it, will, just as soon as the notion of safety is taken from it, be less ready to care for its truth or to feel its power. This is human nature. Another reason undoubtedly is the forced and fanciful exegesis of many of the clergy which comes of their unnatural way of treating the Bible. The result is that the laity imagine that as a book it is hopelessly unintelligible except to one who has the key to unlock its mysterious meanings.

There is need of every special effort to make men know

the Bible. The Bible class, the expository lecture, the illustrated picture books for the young, none can do too much to familiarize men with the Scriptures. Dr. Moulton's work is just in line with much that is being done to restore the Bible to its place in the hearts of the people. Only his undertaking is of a much more serious nature than anything which has yet been attempted. With the Bible published as literature we can see no valid reason for its being excluded from our public schools and universities. We understand that in Chicago and in Detroit the effort has been made, with some success in Detroit, to introduce a Bible reader into the public schools. Of course, like all reforms, it has met with opposition, but the unreasonableness of such objection is apparent and the end will be that enlightened public sentiment will demand that the Hebrew Scriptures be taught, along with the classic literatures of Greece and Rome.

Why should not a Bible reader be compiled from the choicest selections taken out of the life of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, with extracts from the Psalms and from Isaiah, and even including the parables of Our Lord and the Sermon on the Mount? What a new insight it would give our boys and girls if they were made to memorize and recite some of the glowing and eloquent orations of Moses or such an impassioned song as that of Deborah in Judges v. Acquaintance with the Bible on its literary and artistic side would give them a taste for reading it that would inevitably lead them to a deeper and wider knowledge than they now possess.

It is one of the paradoxes of our educational system that we practically exclude from school and college any study of the one Book which has done more than any other to form our language, to mold our literature, and whose thought and ideas are woven into the web of our civilization. We are content to go for liberal education to literatures which morally are at opposite poles from ourselves. Much of Greek and Roman literature is only the glorification of the sensuous. It rests upon a false philosophy and is animated by an entirely different conception of life from that which in-

spires men to-day. We do not call attention to these limitations of the classics by way of underestimating their value as necessary factors in any system of higher education, but only to suggest the importance of studying a literature which provides a healthy corrective. But no one can state the educational advantages of such a study of the Hebrew Scriptures better than Dr. Moulton himself. "It is surely good that our youth, during the formative period, should have displayed to them in a literary dress as brilliant as that of Greek literature . . . a people dominated by an utter passion for righteousness, a people whose ideas of piety, of infinite good, of universal order, of faith in the irresistible downfall of all moral evil, moved to a poetic passion as fervid and speech as musical as when Sappho sang of love or Æschylus thundered his deep notes of destiny."

If it be objected that the introduction of the Bible as literature into our public schools and universities will involve the teachers in theological and doctrinal controversies, it may be answered that such need not be the case. The "Modern Reader's Bible," to our mind, has solved that problem by showing that it is possible to treat the Bible as literature, without raising any questions regarding the origin and authenticity of the several books and without advancing any theory of their inspiration. At any rate, if it is not practicable or expedient to make the attempt with the whole Bible, there can be no valid objection to the introduction of selected books and portions of books into the schools.

As a guide to the interpretation of the inner matter and spirit of the sacred Scriptures we believe that an appreciation of its literary forms is essential. This, of course, opens up a whole field of possibilities which we have no time to go into now. But at least there can be no doubt that the forbidding form in which the Bible is usually presented has had much to do with the aversion that many people feel for reading it. To get an idea of the harm which has been done by the arbitrary and misleading chapter and verse arrangement of the Scriptures, let the reader imagine the poems of Chaucer, the plays of Shakspeare, the essays of Macaulay, and the his-

tories of Motley bound together in a single volume; let him suppose the whole reduced to the dead level of prose—the titles of the poems and essays dropped and the divisions made into chapters and sentences. Is it any wonder that the Bible has suffered after passing through such a process as that? Is it any wonder that men, with the exception of a few scholars, have lost all appreciation of the literary beauty and charm of the Hebrew Scriptures?

With the successful completion of Dr. Moulton's admirable undertaking we may look for a large increase of interest in the Bible and for a much better understanding of its meaning. The low price of each volume of the series puts it within the reach of all, while its convenient and attractive size and appearance will add to the effect of its literary excellence.

W. A. GUERRY.